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ABSTRACT

While school psychology training programs have grown and changed over the years, empirical evidence concerning the changes is limited. A survey of 208 school psychology training programs was conducted to obtain information about trainers' perceptions of significant problems influencing the practice of school psychology, required coursework and educational experiences, and recruitment strategies. Responding program directors (N=139) cited an overemphasis on assessment, resulting in limited opportunity to engage in consultation and cognitive/behavioral interventions as the most serious problem influencing the practice of school psychology. Poor working conditions such as low salaries, inadequate resources, and lack of respect for professional skills was the second most frequently cited problem. The need for a more professional working environment was stressed. Program directors rank ordered the five most important academic and training experiences, in order of importance, to be psychodiagnostic assessment, consultation, internship, practicum, and cognitive and/or behavioral interventions. Another significant finding was that brochures were perceived as the most successful recruitment strategy while trips to other colleges and universities received the lowest rating. These findings have implications for how school psychology graduate programs could most effectively spend their limited recruitment funds. (NB)

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School Psychology Training Programs: Trainer's Perceptions

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Running Head: TRAINING PROGRAMS

ABSTRACT

While school psychology training programs have grown and changed over the years, empirical evidence concerning the changes is limited. Through a survey of school psychology training programs, information was obtained about trainer's perceptions of problems influencing the practice of school psychology, educational experiences, and recruitment methods. An overemphasis on assessment and poor working conditions were cited as the two most serious problems influencing the practice of school psychology today. The need for a more professional working environment was stressed. Another significant finding was that brochures were perceived as the most successful recruitment strategy while trips to other colleges and universities received the lowest rating. Implications on how school psychology graduate programs could spend limited recruitment funds were discussed.

School Psychology Training Programs:

Trainer's Perceptions

Within the past several decades, the number of school psychology training programs has significantly increased (Cardon & French, 1968/69; Bardon & Walker, 1972; Goh, 1977; French & McCloskey, 1980; Fagan, 1985). Phillips (1985) indicates a growth of 139 percent in training programs within this time period. Not only have programs changed in quantity, training emphases have also changed to more accurately reflect current literature. According to Goh (1977), "The overall picture of graduate education in school psychology has changed considerably from the 1960's to the middle of the 1970's." What is the precise nature of this change?

The existing literature concerning current school psychology training programs in general is limited. For example, not enough is known about the curriculum or student recruitment methods used in graduate programs for school psychology. Available literature on the training programs of school psychology is often subjective and not empirically based. According to Phillips (1985), more attention should be focused on the examination and assessment of empirical data concerning the education of school psychologists, such as the recent Brown

and Minke study (1986). In other words, training programs need to be aware of not only what other programs have done but what other programs are currently doing. This is particularly important given recent changes in school psychology. For example, within the past five years North Carolina eliminated the Level I category for school psychologists; thus, a two year Master's degree or equivalent is now necessary to be certified as a school psychologist. Changes such as these have an immediate impact on school psychology training programs. These changes among others have not yet been reflected in the empirical literature.

The purposes of the present research were to obtain information concerning school psychology trainer's perceptions of: (a) significant problems influencing the practice of school psychology; (b) required coursework and educational experiences; and, (c) recruitment strategies.

METHOD

Based on a review of literature (e.g., APA, 1981; Brown & Minke, 1984), a questionnaire was developed to assess trainers' perceptions of key factors affecting school psychology programs [1]. Information was solicited regarding: (A) degree program(s) offered; (B) academic hours required at each program level; (C)

department(s) administering program; (D) success of various recruitment methods; (E) curriculum; (F) perceived problems affecting the practice of school psychology; (G) perceived influence of state departments of education on program curriculum; and, (H) enrollment status. Two questions were open-ended because it was not possible to pre-determine the responses for these questions.

The questionnaire and a cover letter explaining the purposes of the study were mailed to each trainer included in the National Association of School Psychologists Directory of School Psychology Training Programs (Brown & Minke, 1984) along with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Respondents were asked to return the completed questionnaire within three weeks of its receipt. All responses were kept confidential. A follow-up letter and an additional copy of the questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of the nonresponding institutions. Out of 208 programs, 139 programs responded for a return rate of 66.8%.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides a view of the problems program directors believed influenced the practice of school psychology. The most serious problem perceived by trainers was an overemphasis on assessment, resulting in limited opportunity to engage in

consultation and cognitive/behavioral interventions. Poor working conditions such as low salaries, inadequate resources, and lack of respect for professional skills was the second most cited problem. Other problems noted were school psychology's relationship with special education and the need to extend services beyond special education.

Insert Table 1 about here

Program directors were requested to rank order the five most important academic and training experiences. In order of importance, they were: Psychodiagnostic Assessment, Consultation, Internship, Practicum, and Cognitive and/or Behavioral Interventions. Experiences receiving the fewest nominations were: Vocational Development, Program Evaluation, Statistics, Prevention, and Family Systems.

Insert Table 2 about here

Trainers were asked their perceptions of how successful various recruitment methods were (Table 2). Interestingly, brochures were rated as being most successful while trips to

other colleges and universities received the lowest rating. The second rated recruitment strategy entailed having the program's current students serve as recruiters. A "word of mouth" approach was believed to pay off in terms of student recruitment. Recruitment methods perceived as third and fourth best were recruiting one's own undergraduates and attending professional meetings, respectively. These data have implications for how graduate programs could spend limited recruitment funds.

DISCUSSION

The data herein are fairly consistent with findings from previous surveys (e.g., Brown & Minke, 1986; Goh, 1977; Pfeiffer & Marmo, 1981) in that assessment is (a) viewed as the activity in which school psychologists are engaged in most, and (b) ranked highest among required training experiences. More importantly, information has been obtained about trainer's perceptions of school psychology practice.

Program directors believed that the most serious problem influencing the practice of school psychology today was an overemphasis on assessment, thus resulting in limited opportunity to engage in such areas as consultation, cognitive/behavioral interventions, and counseling. In

addition, the problem of poor working conditions such as inadequate office and testing space would seem to add to the stress inherent in being a school psychologist. School psychologists are not alone in viewing the public schools as a less than desirable place in which to work. The 1986 Carnegie Forum report entitled, A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century discussed the need for a more professional environment for teachers. School psychologists would benefit, also, from a more professional work environment.

The listing of the most important academic and training experiences agrees with Brown and Minke (1986). When the activities in which school psychologists are typically engaged (e.g., testing) are examined, the relationship with educational experiences becomes apparent (Anderson, Cancelli, & Kratochwill, 1984). When one examines the courses (e.g., program evaluation) ranked lowest, a correspondence is seen with the limited time in which school psychologists are engaged in these activities (Anderson et al., 1984). The small amounts of time spent in these activities could reflect (a) the limited preparation school psychologists receive in non-assessment related areas or (b) the lack of importance attributed to these areas by school staff.

One finding that has implications for training programs concerns the perceived success of recruitment methods, particularly those training programs that may have limited funds. According to trainer's perceptions, it appears that those funds would be better directed toward brochures than trips to other universities or colleges (i.e., brochures were rated the most successful while travel to other universities or colleges was ranked the least successful). Programs might wish to devote more attention to the design of brochures so that they would better attract prospective students' attention. Another highly rated method was having current students recruit. A way to implement this method would be, upon a request for information, to have a graduate student make a phone call to the prospective student. Surprisingly, a number of programs reported no special attempts made to recruit students even though national figures (The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 30, 1985) suggest a decline in available students. It might benefit programs such as these to implement active recruitment efforts. It is certainly possible, however, that a number of these programs not actively engaged in recruitment rely on their reputation and, therefore, may have a selection,

not a recruitment, problem. Empirical data is lacking about the actual effectiveness of different recruitment methods.

In summary, it should be noted that there could be significant differences between self-reported and actual training practices. Thus, the results may have limited generalizability. Future research needs to address whether the concerns mentioned by school psychology program directors are legitimate concerns of practicing school psychologists.

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Footnote

[1] A copy of the survey is available to interested readers. Please direct inquiries to the senior author.

Table 1. Perceived Problems Influencing the Practice of School Psychology.

Problem	Rank
Overemphasis on assessment	1
Poor work conditions (low salaries, work constraints)	2
Relationship with Special Education	3
Legislation (e.g., PL 94-142 and state regulations)	4
Identity	5.5
Poorly trained professionals	5.5
Image-related	7
Not enough opportunity to provide other services	8
Lack of documentation about our effectiveness	9
Need to extend services beyond Special Education	10.5
M.A. vs Ph.D. issue (NASP vs APA)	10.5
Status of profession in relation to mainstream psychology	12.5
State certification standards	12.5
Fairness in assessment (nonbiased testing)	14

Table 2. Program Director's Rankings of Recruitment Method's Success (1 to 7 scale, with 1 = Most Successful to 7 = Least Successful).

	N	M	SD
Brochures	77	2.26	1.51
Current Students serve as Recruiters	77	2.51	1.58
Recruitment of own Undergraduates	58	3.14	1.72
Professional Meetings	58	3.78	1.62
Posters	43	3.86	2.08
Trips to other Colleges/Universities	49	4.53	1.96
No special attempts made	43		
Other			
Past students serve as recruiters	8		
APA Graduate Study in Psychology	4		